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Water

Five families stuck with 'poison' water

Pollution makes life a nightmare

By Michele Meyer

The Register Star

ROCKTON — Some nights, Pat Marx says, she dreams she looks out her living room window to see an endless field of grass.

But when she awakes, the nightmare begins. Three corrugated-metal buildings, with boarded-up windows — and occasionally an iridescent orange pond or two — are still across the street.

And now, she can't drink her water.

Marx, 905 Watts Ave., was not surprised to receive the Friday, April 13th, letter from the Winnebago County Health Department telling her it might be best to avoid using her tap water. She said she has been cooking with water with a white scum on the surface that cracks upon cooling.

Her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. William Altenberg and Etta Hader, were told two years ago they should look beyond their private wells for water. Last year, the Clifford McHones were told the same. The Kenneth Lowerys received their letter when the Marxes did.

All of the families live on Watts Avenue.

Marx and several of her neighbors

blame United Recovery, the industrial-waste processing plant across the street. The Winnebago County Health Department and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency say the firm may very well be innocent of blame.

The contaminated wells contain some of the following cancer-causing chemicals — 1,1,1-trichloroethane, 1,1-dichloroethane, trichloroethylene, chloroform and tetrachloroethylene. Quantities have differed from a trace to 1,000 parts per billion. Marx received the warning when contaminants totaled 5 parts per billion in her well.

The chemicals — mostly industrial solvents — are confirmed to cause cancer in animals, "and as such are considered to be potential carcinogens in man," the letter said.

The lives of Marx and her neighbors have been transformed since the first letter two years ago.

If they forget to pick up water at a friend's home, they go without. Surprise guests or an elaborate dinner may mean no coffee the next morning.

"It seems so strange now when I go to someone's faucet," said Shirley

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Altenberg, who last drank from her tap two years ago.

Marx gets the four to five gallons her family uses every two days from the veterinarian on Prairie Hill. The Altenbergs travel two miles to her mother's home across the river. "You've got to do that in January, when it's 20 below," said Bill Altenberg, a machinist at Warner Electric Brake and Clutch.

The thought of contamination never wanders far from their minds, Marx said. "Now when I hear 1,1,1-trichloroethane, I turn around, just like if I heard by name. That's all you think about."

Marx will read from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. about the solvent's effects and area fights against groundwater pollution. "You want to put it down, but you can't," she said of the materials she reads. "We're living it."

She attends every meeting she can when she isn't reading or phoning government agencies, she added. "You look around, and the laundry's not done and dinner's three hours late."

She no longer waterproofs her children's shoes since she read the product's label. It contained 1,1,1-trichloroethane.

Escape is impossible. No one will buy their homes, Bill Altenberg said. "You put your life savings in here, and all of the sudden your house is not worth anything. It might as well be a hole in the ground."

Each illness fuels fears of the solvent's effects, Marx said. Influenza may be more than a virus; it could be aggravated by the chemicals.

Lifelong exposure at the level found in the Marx's well could add a one-in-a-million chance to the risk

of developing cancer — which already reaches one person in four, said J. Maichle Bacon, environmental health director at the Winnebago County Health Department. "Any level, no matter how small, is going to carry some increase in risk."

Higher levels produce liver, kidney, heart and central nervous system problems and skin rashes, he added.

Marx and the Altenbergs said they are perhaps most bitter toward United Recovery, formerly Soterion Inc. The firm was closed temporarily last October at the order of the IEPA, which cited the plant for three permit violations. The plant's former owner, Gilbert Semans, never applied for required pollution-control permits needed to process, store and transport special wastes in the 2½ years he owned it. Current owner Ernest Brown's home and business phone numbers are unlisted, Marx said.

The EPA and the Health Department are also to blame for their inaction, Altenberg said.

Hononegah Country Estate's water pollution was revealed only a year ago, but a water system is being installed for residents by nearby Warner Electric Brake and Clutch. "Here, we're just working people. No one cares," Altenberg said. "There are not enough of us."

Hononegah Country Estates and Moore Haven subdivisions were ideal for health studies because of the greater number of homes — as many as 162 — affected, Bacon said. The U.S. Department of Energy and Natural Resources decided to fund their tests. The Rockford School of Medicine conducted biological tests and the Water Survey Department conducted environmental ones.

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